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FOOD AID AND HUMAN RIGHTS

One of the most basic human rights is the right to food. Yet one out of every five people goes hungry every day, and more than 20 million people worldwide die from starvation and related illnesses every year. Whatever other rights concern us as individuals, for more than a billion human beings nothing overrides the immediate imperatives of survival. The right to food is therefore a pre-condition to the achievement of other human rights, since "freedom" means little to those who are without the basic means of sustenance.

The World Food Programme, as the food aid organization of the United Nations, has for 30 years directly addressed the right to food. The Programme is now the largest multilateral food distributor in the world, handling 5 million tons of food a year to more than 40 million people. WFP is the largest single source of grant assistance directed at the poor.

Food aid is commonly seen in terms of direct feeding – free handouts to the poor. Yet the work of WFP has shown that food can be a valuable development resource with an important role in overcoming the causes, and not just the symptoms, of poverty. In providing food aid, WFP aims not only to provide short-term sustenance, but to assist families and communities towards attaining more permanent self-sufficiency. Ultimately, WFP views its success not in terms of the volume of food shipped or the numbers of people fed, but in terms of the number of people who, over time, are able to feed themselves.

Emergency food aid

The provision of emergency food aid to victims of large-scale disasters, both natural and human-caused, has come to dominate WFP's work. In 1992 refugee and relief operations accounted for 60 per cent of the Programme's resources, compared with only nine per cent 20 years ago. More than 27 million people, including 14 million refugees and displaced people, received WFP food relief during 1992.

WFP has a large and efficient transport and logistics service, moving relief food by land, sea and air. However, the fact that emergency situations are frequently the result of civil strife also means that the logistics of supplying food aid are often complicated and dangerous. WFP's work in delivering food to civilians on both sides of conflict zones is well known and respected, but this is one area where the right to food can by no means be taken for granted.

In situations where feuding sides have the potential to use food as a weapon, WFP has helped to negotiate "corridors of tranquillity" so that food aid can be delivered to civilians in need on both sides of the conflict, as was done in the Sudan. The difficulties involved in delivering food aid in countries where no government infrastructure exists were tragically exemplified in Somalia during 1992. Many similar situations continue to challenge emergency relief efforts: WFP is currently distributing food in active conflict situations such as Afghanistan, Angola, Cambodia, Liberia, Rwanda, the Sudan and the republics of the former Yugoslavia.

Refugees

In the 1990s, civil strife – often accompanied by violations of human rights – has supplanted natural disaster as the main reason for the large-scale exodus of millions of people from their home countries. In situations where refugees and displaced people may be unable to return home for many years, WFP tries to link the provision of food aid with opportunities for introducing nutrition, health, employment and training activities. In the WFP regional project, aimed at over two million Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees and displaced people, many of the beneficiaries are engaged in a wide range of productive and income-generating activities in the development of basic community infrastructure, agriculture, water supply systems, small-scale livestock, trade and transport.

Yet long-term refugee situations remain one of the most problematic issues for both host countries and relief agencies. In some instances, refugees have been relocated for more than a decade, often in camps, where there is little opportunity for economic advancement. When circumstances permit the return of refugees to their home countries, WFP cooperates with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees in major repatriation programmes – for example, in Afghanistan, where more than 1.5 million refugees have returned from Paki-

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stan and Iran – providing food for their resettlement and rehabilitation.

Development

Programmes to benefit the poor must actually reach the poor if they are to be successful. In this regard, WFP believes that food aid has an intrinsic advantage over other forms of aid, as only the very poor are prepared to work for food rather than cash. No other form of development assistance transfers such a large level of resources directly to the very poor. WFP's current portfolio of development projects provides food to an estimated 52 million people in 88 countries. In 1992 alone, some 15 million people received food from WFP assistance to development projects.

On average, poor families spend as much as 80 per cent of their income, and almost all their time, trying to secure food for the household. WFP food-assisted development projects ease this burden by providing food that would otherwise consume meagre family resources.

In addition, food-for-work projects provide opportunities for poor people to increase directly their income-earning potential. WFP is increasingly using food aid in formal and non-formal vocational training programmes that establish a direct link between the skills imparted and labour-market requirements.

WFP also attempts to address other human rights through the types of development projects it supports. Mothers and children are given access to primary health and nutrition services in supplementary feeding programmes. The children of poor families are given access to education through school feeding programmes, with particular emphasis on the education of girls in societies where female children are traditionally given other roles. Members of poor households – often headed by women – are enabled to attend vocational training centres where meals are provided or take-home family food rations are distributed. In Bangladesh, a Vulnerable Groups Development project has 500,000 women currently enrolled in programmes which provide training in marketable skills and other development services, including literacy.

An important aim of WFP development projects is the involvement of local communities in the decision-making process relating to the design, implementation and evaluation of WFP-assisted projects. One approach has been to provide assistance to strengthen local institutions such as cooperatives, farmers' associations and women's groups, so that they can effectively contribute to development activities. Increased involvement of project beneficiaries in decision-making not only ensures the long-term sustainability of projects, but also puts poor people in a better position to overcome their poverty and to lead lives of dignity – the foundation of human rights.

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